

ART. XV.—*Cremation and Burial in relation to Death Certification.*

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[Read 9th August, 1894.]

It has been alleged that the success of an occasional exhumation and autopsy in the detection of poisoning, constitutes an argument against cremation, and I consider it important that the fallacy of that statement should be thoroughly exposed. Such cases, otherwise, have the unfortunate effect of producing an impression that while such resources exist, there is ample security against poisoning, which is very far from being the case; and that impression operates simply as a delusion and a snare. For it is entirely overlooked that such expedients are but clumsy and inadequate attempts to atone for previous neglect. When delayed for but a limited period they fail to detect all but practically three metallic poisons—arsenic, antimony, and mercury; as the numerous vegetable poisons soon disappear; and, in any case, a deferred autopsy is a disgusting and defective resource. No one but an utterly ignorant person would use arsenic, as it is known to remain for years. But prevention is always far better than cure, and a sufficient examination should always be made *before decomposition and burial*. Not only would the majority of poisons disappear by delay, but it is obviously quite possible that the body itself might be removed after burial, and examination be so prevented.

Cremation as practised in Europe, and proposed here, involves far less risk of impunity for poisoners, than exists under the present system of burial. At Milan, for instance, the parents of a deceased child had obtained all the certificates required for its burial, before it occurred to them to have it cremated. The stricter examinations, however, required for cremation, demonstrated the fact that the child had been poisoned, accidentally, by sweetmeats containing copper. This significant fact not only proved the superiority of the checks used in cremation, but it

also forcibly illustrates the statement made by Judge Williams, on the 30th November, 1893, in the Melbourne Athenæum, that "*scores of people are poisoned and laid in the ground, and the crimes are never detected.*" The same opinion is held by many persons, whose opportunities for judging are above the average. The evidence given last year before the committee appointed by the House of Commons, to enquire into the lax system of death certification, directly corroborates the judge's statement, as any one may see in the *British Medical Journal* for April, May and June, 1893. It was proved that medical certificates of the cause of death were commonly given for 2s. 6d. each, upon the statement of an alleged witness of the death, but without the certifier seeing the corpse; and, that the supposed deceased was alive and well, though the insurance upon his or her life had been paid! It was also stated that some practitioners used printed forms of their own, coloured and printed in simulation of the death certificate forms issued gratuitously by the Registrar-General, but omitting the clause stating that the certifier had attended the deceased in his last illness! The consequent frauds upon Insurance Companies were neither few nor infrequent. From fifteen to twenty thousand persons are buried yearly in England without any medical certificate or enquiry.

In Victoria, a confiding public believes that a medical certificate of the cause of death is given in every case, and that the resulting security to human life is ample, notwithstanding Judge Williams' startling statement. But it is a fact, however incredible it may seem, that there is here *no statutory provision for such a certificate at all*; and, although, death certificates are received by Registrars (for merely statistical purposes only), yet, for the security of human life, they are worthless! When there is a medical attendant, the certificate is generally signed by him; when there is no medical attendant, the certificate is accepted from any person attending or present at the death, or the occupier of the house in which it occurred, or a clergyman. But it is entirely overlooked when accepting (as indispensable for statistical purposes) the certificate of the medical attendant, that as his conduct in that capacity is always liable to be called in question, his own guarantee of it can be worth no more than that of any accountant of the correctness of his own accounts, when

called in question; that is—*nil*! It is absolutely worthless for all practical purposes; yet a medical attendant's certificate is, as a rule, accepted—alone—as the best possible!

Ordinary medical certificates of the cause of death are worthless, on the ground also of *indefiniteness*. Of what worth in such a document (for any purpose) is such a word—for instance—as “enteritis,” which is commonly used, and which would cover—I learn from an expert—ninety-nine cases in a hundred of poisoning, accidental or deliberate! For these reasons the present system simply offers a premium to murder.

It may be asked—Is it really necessary to have an expensive autopsy in every case of death? By no means. Sir H. Thompson, in his “Modern Cremation,” has carefully estimated the percentage of cases in which there is room for doubt as to the cause of death—at one in a hundred. One autopsy in every hundred cases would not be too much to pay for, for the security all round, attained; and would in any case be trifling, compared to one exhumation and more difficult autopsy afterwards.

But the common ignorant objection to an autopsy, arises here for consideration. An antipathy, if harmless, may be defensible. But society has only itself to rely upon; and has an admitted interest, right, and duty, in claiming an autopsy for the general security against poison, etc., for the protection of human life; and what is more—in suspecting an objector of having a motive which itself should constitute an ample ground for insisting upon an autopsy. Such a suspicion should at once over-rule the objection of any person, if it failed to prevent him from making it.

Few people are prepared to believe how absolutely unprotected we are against murder; but Judge Williams' statement is no exaggeration. There is at present no guarantee that any one of us may not be poisoned and buried next week, without any enquiry whatever; provided that a registered practitioner, drunk or sober, wise or foolish, give a true but vague certificate of the cause of death—as “enteritis,” after poisoning a patient—accidentally or deliberately! People forget that by insuring their lives, or making their wills, they give to others a *direct interest in their deaths*, and that there are plenty of unsuspected unscrupulous persons going about, to take advantage of the facilities afforded. Any invalid or feeble person is absolutely at their mercy, or

rather in their power. He can at present best protect himself by carefully providing for a particular examination of his corpse *before* burial, even if he suspect nothing. Let those concerned look to it.

The dismissal on Black Wednesday, in 1878, of all the country coroners, who have never been replaced, must have materially increased these risks to the provincial population.

The precautions which Cremationists recommend, and for their own protection, take, make cremation far safer now than burial, as I think I have shown; for burial, under the present lax and absurd system, offers—I repeat, a premium to murder; and if the apathy of the people may be excused by ignorance or thoughtlessness, the neglect of those to whom they entrust such matters seems the more culpable.

The Cremation Committee of the Royal Society of Victoria strongly recommended that no system (of disposing of the dead) be tolerated, which does not provide amply strict examinations to obviate the possibility of such facts passing undetected.

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